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Tai Chi, Qigong and Transgender Health

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ABSTRACT

Qigong and tai chi are subfields of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Qigong has been around for more than 4,000 years. Tai chi is of a more recent origin, although the literature cannot pinpoint a date that all scholars can agree on. Practicing qigong or tai chi exercises on a regular basis can improve health and cause the body to function more efficiently. Numerous studies have shown that the regular practice of various qigong and tai chi exercises can help in the treatment and even the prevention of certain diseases. As of today, no studies have been conducted on the relationship of tai chi and qigong to transgender health, or at least the author was unable to find any such studies. That is the reason for the present

study, to fill that gap in the literature. Transgender individuals and other individuals in the LGBT community suffer from the same diseases and illnesses as the general population, although they suffer disproportionately in some cases. The present study focuses on those cases.

Key Words: transgender, health, qigong, chi gong, chi kung, health qigong, medical qigong, traditional Chinese medicine, TCM, tai chi, taiji chuan, LGBTQ, 氣功, 气功, 気功, 기공

JEL Codes: D60, I00, I10, I12, I19, J16

INTRODUCTION

Transgenders and transgenderism have been in the news a lot lately, so I decided to do a literature search to find what has been written about transgenders and either tai chi or qigong. The only publication I could find was an internet blog by Miriya Paris (2019), who lamented the fact that she could not find a single article or study that had been done on transgenders and either tai chi or qigong. As an individual who is concerned about the health and well-being of all individuals, I was dismayed that I was not able to find a single article focusing on this subfield, but as an academic, I was somewhat pleased, because I saw an opportunity to write "the" seminal article on this subject. Well, I'll let the reader decide whether this paper qualifies as seminal, but my hope is that it will at least make a positive contribution to the literature.

I have had the opportunity to chat with a number of transgenders over the years. I hesitate to use the term "transgender community," because I prefer to treat people as individuals rather than members of a cohesive group. It has been my experience that transgenders have many differences, but also a few common features. Philosophically, they tend to have libertarian tendencies (live and let live) when it comes to lifestyle issues, although some of those in the West tend to also have totalitarian tendencies when it comes to advocacy, since some of them want to use the force of government to require people to bake cakes for them, sell flowers to them and

employ them. The Asian transgenders I have chatted with do not seem to have this totalitarian streak in them, although there may be exceptions, since the sample size of those I have chatted with has been limited. One area for future research might be to conduct a survey of transgenders to see how their views on a wide range of issues differ from those of the relevant general population. Another study, if it has not already been done, would be to determine whether transgenders who are born with male organs encounter different problems, or have different philosophical views, than individuals who were born with female organs. I am not a specialist in this area, and am not familiar with the literature. Thus, there may be such studies of which I am unaware. My experience chatting with transgenders has been limited to transgenders who were born with male organs (I think. I can't be sure).

It might not be an accurate statement to say that Asian transgenders tend to be happier than transgenders who live in the United States and Europe, but that has been my perception. I might also mention that not all Asian transgenders (referred to as ladyboys in Asia), are equally happy or unhappy. I have read that the most widely-accepted Asian transgenders are those who live in Thailand, the reason being that Thailand is a Buddhist country, and that Buddhists are much more accepting of individual differences in general than are non-Buddhists. A few centuries ago, Thai transgenders were even revered as being special individuals, in the good sense of that term. Many Thais regard ladyboys as being a third gender.

I have also read that transgenders in the Philippines face more discrimination than transgenders in Thailand because the Philippines is a Catholic country, and Catholics and other Christian denominations regard transgenders as practitioners of homosexuality, which is an abomination according to the Bible (Bible.org, 2021; Jehovah's Witnesses, 2021; Wikipedia,

2021a & b, 2021). Buddhist countries like Thailand do not necessarily espouse this view, although some Asians make jokes about transgenders that transgenders do not find amusing.

Although my chats with transgenders have been limited, I am able to reach some tentative conclusions. Most of my chats have been with Thai transgenders who were born with male organs. For a period of about five years, I taught an accelerated summer college accounting course at a university in Bangkok. In my off hours, my wife and I would explore Bangkok, and would visit other Thai cities on weekends and after my teaching assignment had concluded. During these jaunts, we encountered many transgenders, who worked in a variety of occupations. Although many transgenders were sex workers, many others were not. We met transgenders working in the cosmetic departments of shops, as waitresses, accountants, hotel desk clerks, beauty parlor employees, teachers, health care professionals, massage therapists, and probably a few other occupations I can't think of at the moment. Our chats revealed that, although there was some employment discrimination, and somewhat of a lack of acceptance in society, they were able to deal with it, and most of them seemed to be quite happy. One person I spoke to said she loved being a ladyboy and wouldn't want to be anything else. She also mentioned that there was no way she would ever want reassignment surgery. She liked her organs just the way they were.

One encounter we had with transgender sex workers sticks in my mind. One of our favorite restaurants is a Mexican restaurant on the edge of Patpong, one of the three red light districts in Bangkok. We try to go there at least once or twice whenever we are in Bangkok. The food is good and relatively cheap (although it doesn't taste Mexican), and they have a karaoke DJ and singer from the Philippines who lets my wife sing. One night after dinner we decided to take a walk through Patpong, to see how the other half lives. We felt perfectly safe walking through the well-

lit streets, which were crowded with people. Also, the tour book said that the police patrol the area to make sure that tourists aren't accosted.

When we got about 100 yards into Patpong, we were gently accosted by two young ladyboys (which is a pejorative term in the West, but is the label they call themselves with pride, and refers only to transgenders who were born with male organs), who grabbed us by the hand and arm and dragged us into a ladyboy bar. They proceeded to sit us down at a table and were successful in engaging us in a conversation. After about 60 seconds, they suggested we buy them a ladyboy drink, which is an overpriced drink consisting of little or no alcohol. They receive a percentage of the alcohol sales they are able to make, so it is part of their job to solicit drinks from tourists. We accepted, partly to be polite, and partly because we hesitated to say no, since we were no longer out in the well-lit street that was patrolled by Thai police.

They spoke very good English, and were able to give us the short version of their life history. My guess is that they were in their early 20s. They came from Isaan, which is in the northeastern part of Thailand. It is a poor, rice growing region. Many people from Isaan gravitate to Bangkok because of the economic opportunities. They generally work hard for low wages and send money back home to their parents.

They started off being brothers. At some point, they realized that they were ladyboys. When they announced that fact to their parents, their father disowned them, although their mother was more accepting of their coming out. They eventually moved to Bangkok, underwent psychological counseling, which was mandatory prior to receiving sex reassignment surgery, and eventually had the surgery. One of the sisters got up from her chair and pulled down her pants to show me that she had had the surgery. Needless to say, my wife was quite amused, as was I. After about 20 minutes, they invited us to go upstairs, but we declined the invitation. We bought them another

overpriced drink, chatted a while longer, gave them a tip and left. It was an enlightening conversation.

So, what does all this have to do with tai chi and qigong? For those who are not acquainted with these two terms, a short review is in order. Tai chi might be considered a subset of kung fu, which is a Chinese martial art. There are several kinds of tai chi. Some practitioners emphasize the martial arts aspects of tai chi, while others focus on the health benefits. [As an aside, I might mention that some Thai ladyboys earn the money they need for gender reassignment surgery by being Thai kickboxers, so if you ever encounter one, keep that in mind. If you insult one of them, she may kick your ass.]

Tai chi is a kind of dynamic (moving) meditation. As such, it has the same health benefits as other kinds of meditation (static). Because movement is involved, it has health benefits that are similar to those obtained by other kinds of gentle exercise. When practiced properly, the health benefits obtained may be better than the benefits obtained by doing meditation and gentle exercise separately, as many studies have shown (PubMed.gov, 2021). The oldest style of tai chi is the Chen style, which originated in the Chen Village by the Chen family around 1670, although elements of tai chi go back much farther than that (Lam, 2021a; Ross, 2014; Wikipedia, 2021). Yang style (Wikipedia, 2021) is the most popular style, and is practiced by more people than any other style. Sun style is the youngest tai chi style (Lam, 2021a,b), and is especially suited for elderly people because it has only high stances, which makes it easier to balance and not fall. The other two main styles of tai chi are Wu and Wu Hao. The five main styles are more similar than different.

Qigong [pronounced chee gong or chee kung] is a subset of tai chi. “Qi” (chee) means energy, and “gong” has several translations, one of which is “work.” So qigong is energy work,

similar to, but also different from Reiki. It has been said that all tai chi is qigong, but not all qigong is tai chi. The history of qigong goes back thousands of years (Wikipedia, 2021). It is part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Entire hospitals in China are devoted to treating a wide range of patients using qigong therapy. A very short and inadequate explanation of the theory behind tai chi and qigong would be that energy flows throughout the body, and when the flow of energy is blocked, it causes illness. Tai chi and qigong remove those blocks, causing energy to flow more freely, which leads to better health and the alleviation of illness. Entire books have been written on the benefits of tai chi and qigong (Frantzis, 2005, 2010, 2014; Friedman, 2006a,b, 2009; Jahnke, 1997, 2002; Liu & Qiang, 2013; Munro, 2017) , and how they work to improve health, so the explanation I just gave leaves out many details.

Which brings us to the intersection of tai chi, qigong, and transgenders. Although transgenders suffer from the same illnesses and diseases as the rest of us, they also suffer from problems that most of us don't encounter, at least not to the same extent. Rejection is one of them. Like the two brothers/sisters in my example above, family members sometimes disown them. They are viewed as being abnormal or even mentally ill by many people, especially in the West, but also in Asia and other parts of the world. In some countries, they are thrown off rooftops. They are discriminated against in employment and are precluded from many occupations, which gives them a sense of rejection and low self-esteem.

Another thing I might mention has to do with Thai (and other Asian) culture. In many Asian countries, the children take care of their parents in old age. Pensions and savings are practically nonexistent in many Asian countries. Since ladyboys don't have children, one might reasonably ask, "Who takes care of ladyboys when they get old?" I asked this question to a few people in Thailand. One woman, who was not a ladyboy, told me that family members (brothers

and sisters) take care of them, which was reassuring. When I asked this question to a ladyboy, she told me that she owned title to some farmland in Isaan, and she could live off that income when she was too old to work in the sex industry. Some of her family members lived and worked on that land, and were taking care of it for her. She also mentioned that she sends money to them every month because she earns much more as a sex worker in Bangkok than the entire family earns as rice farmers.

So, why have no studies been conducted involving transgender individuals and tai chi and qigong? Perhaps gathering together a relevant sample size might be difficult, especially in the West, where transgenders are relatively uncommon, and often don't advertise themselves. If they receive medical treatment, it is usually the same as the health treatment received by the wider community. However, transgenders are more prone to certain illnesses than the general population. In addition to sexually transmitted diseases, they also face a heightened risk of various kinds of mental illness, such as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety. which are caused by rejection and the feeling that they don't belong.

The Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) website has a few postings that address transgender health issues. Access to healthcare is a problem. Some transgenders do not seek medical care for fear of rejection. Also, some medical care providers do not know much about treating special transgender issues, and some transgender services are not covered by insurance (VUMC, 2021a). One of the nice things about tai chi and qigong is that they are free. There is no need to fear rejection or verbal or nonverbal abuse from medical professionals because tai chi and qigong exercises can be performed in private, and can be done without a prescription or the need to obtain anyone's approval.

The Vanderbilt University Medical Center website also identifies other health concerns faced by transgenders, including hormones, cancer, injectable silicone, substance use, depression and anxiety, sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol, tobacco, and heart disease as health problems transgenders often face (VUMC, 2021a). Hormone therapy involves risks, and transgenders tend to use hormone therapy more than the general population. Testosterone can damage the liver, estrogen can increase blood pressure, blood glucose, and the risk of blood clotting. Anti-androgens can lower blood pressure, disturb electrolytes, and cause dehydration (VUMC, 2021a). The regular practice of tai chi or qigong can't do much to reduce the dangers of silicone, but they have been known to reduce blood pressure, depression and anxiety, and might also be used as part of a medical program to reduce alcohol and tobacco consumption.

Cancer is a concern for all segments of the population, including transgenders. Numerous studies have found that the regular practice of tai chi and qigong can alleviate some of the side-effects of traditional cancer therapy. This issue is discussed in more detail below.

Transgenders suffer from substance abuse at higher rates than the general population (VUMC, 2021a). The danger of sharing needles cannot be reduced by the practice of tai chi or qigong. Nor can the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. However, the practice of tai chi and qigong can reduce the desire to abuse substances.

Numerous studies have found that tai chi and qigong can be used to reduce or even eradicate these illnesses. The remainder of this paper discusses some of those studies.

METHODOLOGY

The PubMed.gov database was used to find studies where tai chi or qigong have been used to effectively treat these ailments.

FINDINGS

Many studies have found that the practice of tai chi and qigong have had beneficial effects on various kinds of mental illness, depression and anxiety. The studies mentioned in this paper constitute just a small sampling of available studies. Those interested in learning about additional studies can find them in PubMed.gov and other places. At least one qigong online instructor shouts from rooftops (figuratively) that qigong cured him of depression (Korahais, 2021a).

Anxiety

Transgenders have a higher than average probability of suffering from anxiety. A number of studies have found that the practice of tai chi and/or qigong can reduce the detrimental health effects of anxiety. Kam Chuen Lam (2014) has written a workbook on qigong exercises that are recommended for alleviating anxiety. A study by Li et al. (2019) examined the effect of mind-body exercises on anxiety and depression in COPD patients. Liu et al. (2020) studied the effects of tai chi and qigong exercises on depression and anxiety on individuals with substance use disorders. Wang et al. (2014) searched 13 databases for studies on the effects of qigong exercises on anxiety, and found several studies that indicated that such exercises reduce anxiety significantly.

Cancer

LGBTQs have a higher probability of contracting some types of cancer than the general population, partly because of social habits and poor access to health care (VUMC, 2021c). Lesbian and bisexual women may have a higher risk of cervical and breast cancer because they are more

likely to smoke, use alcohol, not give birth until after age 30, eat a high fat diet, and be overweight (VUMC, 2021c). The VUMC website did not address the cancer risks to transgenders specifically.

Anal cancer is also a problem. The rate of anal cancer among men who have sex with men is 80 times greater than for heterosexual men. The VUMC website did not give separate statistics for transgenders (VUMC, 2021c).

The regular practice of tai chi and qigong have been shown to have a positive effect on the treatment and cure of cancer. Helen Liang was diagnosed with lymphoma cancer and was given a prognosis to live of just three weeks (Liang, 2017a). She did qigong exercises as part of her medical treatment program and was totally cured of cancer. She has published a DVD demonstrating 15 qigong exercises for cancer patients (Liang, 2017b).

Numerous studies on the treatment of cancer using tai chi or qigong exercises have been conducted. Summaries of some of these studies may be found at McGee (2020b, g; 2021b, c). Arring et al. (2019) and Sowada (2019) investigated the effects of integrative therapies on cancer-related fatigue. Campbell et al. (2020) examined the effect of exercise on cancer-related cognitive impairment. Chang and Knobf (2019) conducted a study on the effect of qigong and tai chi exercises on cancer care. Deng (2019) examined the effect of qigong and other integrative medicine therapies on pain management in cancer patients. Garland, Mahon and Irwin (2019) examined the effect of qigong exercises on sleep health of cancer survivors. Larkey et al. (2020) conducted a study of how qigong exercises affect heart rate variability in cancer recovery.

The studies listed here are just a small smattering of the studies that have been conducted on the effects of tai chi and qigong exercises on the treatment of cancer. Readers who are interested in finding additional studies may find them at the PubMed.gov website.

Depression

Transgenders have significantly higher rates of depression than the general population. The problems of depression can be even worse for those who do not have adequate social support, or those who cannot express their gender identity. Teenagers and young adults suffer an increased risk of suicide (VUMC, 2021a). Lesbian women are twice as likely to suffer from depression as the general population; gay men are three times as likely (VUMC, 2021b). The VUMC website did not mention separate statistics for transgenders. Numerous studies have found that the practice of tai chi and qigong can have a positive effect on depression.

A word search for "depression" on the Qigong and Energy Medicine Database received 1578 hits. A search for "depression" and "qigong" on the PubMed.gov database received 179 hits. Thus, the studies discussed here are a small fraction of the studies that have been conducted on this topic of qigong and depression.

Wu et al. (2019) reviewed several studies that found the practice of qigong had a beneficial effect on reducing depression in COPD patients. A study by Li et al (2019) also found that mind-body exercises such as qigong reduced anxiety and depression levels in COPD patients. Song et al. (2017) found that tai chi and qigong exercises reduced depression levels in patients with Parkinson's disease. Yeung et al. (2019) found that qigong and tai chi exercises have a beneficial effect on mood regulation, and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Heart Disease & Obesity

Transgenders have a higher risk of heart disease and obesity for a variety of reasons, including smoking, alcohol use, poor diet, high blood pressure, diabetes, physical inactivity, and hormone use (VUMC, 2021a,d). The regular practice of tai chi and qigong have been found to be

beneficial in the treatment of heart disease and obesity. Mao et al. (2020) studied the beneficial effects of baduanjin (a qigong set of exercises) on left ventricular remodelling in patients after acute myocardial infarction. Zhang et al. (2020) surveyed 886 clinical studies in 14 countries on the application of qigong to the treatment of many diseases, including heart disease.

Risom et al. (2017) Investigated the effects of various kinds of exercise rehabilitation, including qigong exercises, on adults with atrial fibrillation. Chen et al. (2019) investigated the use of qigong on various kinds of heart diseases. Cheng et al. (2018) found that Chan-Chuang qigong improved exercise capacity, depression, and quality of life in patients with heart failure. Kuang et al. (1989) investigated the application of qigong therapy to the treatment of changes in the sex hormones of female type II diabetics, coronary heart disease, and hypertension. Hung et al. (2016) studied the effects of qigong exercise on biomarkers and mental and physical health in adults with at least one risk factor for coronary artery disease.

Li et al. (2020) studied the effects of fitness qigong and tai chi on middle-aged and elderly patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus. Larkey et al. (2018) conducted a study of body composition outcomes of tai chi and qigong practice and found them to be beneficial for individuals who were obese. Liu et al. (2018) found that health qigong baduanjin reduced the blood sugar levels of obese female patients with diabetes, and had some positive effects on the body part of obesity and blood lipid indicators.

Mental Health

It is reasonable to expect that transgenders would have a higher incidence of mental illness than the general population, given the fact that they are rejected by a large segment of society. The Vanderbilt University Medical Center has identified several kinds of mental health issues that

transgenders face at a higher rate than the general population (VUMC, 2021b). They must cope with stigma, discrimination and violence. They often have negative feelings about themselves and low self-esteem. They tend to be isolated and lonely. In many cases, they must hide their gender identity or sexual orientation (VUMC, 2021b). VUMC has listed the most common LGBTQ mental health issues as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and thinking about or attempting suicide (VUMC, 2021b).

Dheine et al. (2016) published a review of the literature on mental health and gender dysphoria a few years ago. They reviewed 38 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that described the prevalence rates of psychiatric disorders and psychiatric outcomes for people with gender dysphoria. The main disorders they identified were depression and anxiety, which transgenders were significantly more likely to experience than the general population. They also found that the rates of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder were not significantly different than the rates for the general population. Some of the studies they reviewed found higher psychopathology in trans women, while other studies found no significant difference between gender groups. Chen et al. (2019) investigated the use of qigong on various kinds of psychological disorders.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Many publications are available on the science and practice of both tai chi and qigong. For some bibliographies, see McGee (2020a, b). For some specific studies, see McGee (2020c-g, 2021a-c). The Chinese Health Qigong Association has published nine instructional books and DVD sets that explain and show how nine different qigong sets should be practiced. Helen Liang (2017b) has published a DVD showing 15 qigong exercises she recommends for treating and curing cancer. Anthony Korahais has a youtube website (2021b) containing many videos showing

how certain qigong exercises should be performed. He also offers several qigong courses online, some of which are free (Korahais, 2021a).

The internet contains a wealth of information on both tai chi and qigong exercise sets. The most comprehensive free Yang 24 tai chi form instructional videos I have found are by Andrew Plitt (2021). Dr. Paul Lam (2021b) sells several DVD instructional videos on various tai chi forms. As I mentioned before, Anthony Korahais has made dozens of excellent free videos, and has also been offering several comprehensive courses online that are not quite free. Many other instructional videos are available, of course. I cited these particular videos because I am familiar with them, and I regard them as being high quality.

Although I was not able to find any studies that focused specifically on transgenders and tai qi or qigong, the results of numerous studies on tai chi and qigong that apply to the general population also have wide applicability to transgenders and other LGBTQ individuals. Thus, perhaps there is no need to do any studies that focus specifically on LGBTQ individuals, but I will leave that decision to others to determine.

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